

“What it Means to Be United Methodist: What We Believe”

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Matthew 28:19-20 CEB

19 Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”

Mark 12:30-31 CEB

30 *and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.* **31** The second is this, *You will love your neighbor as yourself.* No other commandment is greater than these.”

What does it mean to be United Methodist? What We Believe

What does it mean to be United Methodist?

For the next few weeks we'll be talking about some of the basics of what it means to be a United Methodist:

- What we Believe
- The Methodist History of Mother's Day and the Methodist Tradition to “love alike, even when we don't think alike”
- Methodist Polity - Polity being the churchy word for governance style
- And our Mission as Methodists

Today we're talking about What We Believe as United Methodists.

John Wesley in his sermon, The Character of a Methodist, wrote:

1. THE distinguishing marks of a methodist are not his opinions of any sort. His assenting to this or that scheme of religion, his embracing any particular set of notions, his espousing the judgment of one man or of another, are all quite wide of the point. Whosoever therefore imagines, that a methodist is, a man of such or such an opinion is grossly ignorant of the whole affair, he mistakes the truth totally. We believe indeed, that all scripture is given by inspiration of God; ... We believe Christ to be the eternal supreme God... But as to all opinions which do not strike at the root of christianity, we think and let think. So that whatsoever they are, whether right or wrong, they are no distinguishing marks of a methodist.

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United Methodists “think and let think.”

In discussions about the beliefs of United Methodists we often refer to ourselves as “a Big Tent Church.” By which we mean that in our connectional, global, denomination there’s room inside the “revival tent,” for all Methodists, “right or wrong.”

Methodists of different cultures.

Methodists of different theological slants.

Methodists of different political views.

Methodists of different worship styles.

Methodists of different traditions.

In terms of our beliefs United Methodists are pretty basic, orthodox, protestant, Christians.

- We Believe in God: Creator, Christ and Spirit.
- We believe in the Holy Trinity - that God, Spirit and Jesus are one personality with 3 expressions.
- We believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God, not written by God, but written by humans who were inspired by God. We do not have an official translation of the Bible, much less an official English translation, because we are a global church who speak many languages, and as Biblical scholarship improves we want to learn from new translations.
- Like most Protestants we observe only 2 sacraments: Baptism and Communion. We believe that God is present in a spiritual way at both, but do not believe that water becomes any more holy that it already is as a part of God’s creation, and we do not believe that communion elements are transformed into the physical body and blood of Jesus.
- Like all other orthodox (I’m using orthodox in its literal meaning of “right belief” not referring to the Orthodox denominations) Christians we believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, walked the earth, made disciples, healed people, was crucified, died, was buried and rose again on the third day, and has promised to come again.
- We believe in the Church Universal (universal is literally what the word Catholic translates to in English). The Church Universal founded by the Apostles and empowered by the Holy Spirit. United Methodists are, in fact, a little more invested in the idea of the Church Universal than many other denominations - we helped found the World Council of Churches, our seminaries are the only ones who will admit Mormons, and we’re quite willing to work with other denominations and people of other faiths. I like to say, Methodists play nice with others.
- We do both adult and infant baptism and will dunk, sprinkle or pour, as requested. The only thing we won’t do is rebaptize.

All of our basic Christian beliefs are contained in detail in the United Methodist Book of Discipline in “Part III Doctrinal Standards and our Theological Task.” This is available publicly and for free for anyone to read in the online version at:

<https://www.cokesbury.com/book-of-discipline-book-of-resolutions-free-versions>

Included in this section are the Articles of Religion of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church who merged in 1968 to become the United Methodist Church.

There’s also some ways in which United Methodist beliefs are different from other protestant, Christian, denominations.

- One United Methodist distinctive is our emphasis on Practical Theology. We don’t spend time wondering how many Angels can dance on the head of a pin, or the exact mechanics of the bodily resurrection. Our emphasis is on theology that helps us live our everyday lives. The church is not meant to serve the academic pursuit of theology, instead paragraph 105 of the Book of Discipline reads, “Theology serves the church by interpreting the world’s needs and challenges to the church and by interpreting the gospel to the world,”
- Since we have a mandate to do practical theology for an ever changing world, rather than having a whole lot of static doctrine, we instead embrace a process for doing theology, called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. We call it the quadrilateral because we use 4 main tools for theology:
 - Scripture - by which we mean the Bible. Inspired by God, but written by humans who wrote from their own cultures and times and with a pre-scientific world view.
 - Tradition - by which we mean the collected music, extra-biblical stories of the church, the writings of various theologians and reformers, and the rituals and practices of the church.
 - Reason - by which we mean logic and science and good sense.
 - Experience - by which we mean our own spiritual experience - the ways in which God is still speaking today.

Most protestant Christians use Scripture, Tradition and Reason as tools for theology, and some also add experience, but what is uniquely United Methodist is our emphasis on keeping the theological discussion constantly moving through Conferencing, rather than trying to write unchangeable doctrine.

- The aim of our practical theology is always Grace. United Methodists believe in 3 kinds of Grace:
 - Prevenient - “Pre” as in before - meaning that before we believe in God, God has Grace for us.

- Justifying Grace - this is the grace that we experience when we recognize God's love for us and that we are justified by Grace through faith and not by works.
- And Sanctifying Grace - this means that salvation isn't the end of our journey, it's the beginning of our journey. Our faith isn't about a ticket to heaven, our faith is about becoming citizens of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Not just praying, "thy will be done," but actually trying to do the will of God here on earth as in heaven. With lots of Grace, because we never do it perfectly!

Methodists believe in BOTH Evangelism AND Social Justice)

- But I think our most important United Methodist distinctive is that we are both evangelical and justice oriented. You may have noticed that in the US, there are basically two flavors of Christians:
 - Evangelical Christians who care about your eternal salvation but feel like your quality of life here on earth is pretty much your problem. They do evangelism but not social justice.
 - Mainline to Progressive Christians who care about our quality of life here on earth, but feel like your eternal salvation is pretty much your problem. They do social justice and charity, but not evangelism.

Methodists, when we are acting like Methodists, do both! We love our neighbors by both introducing people to Jesus and caring for the "least of these." (Mt 25:40)

Which is why I chose these two scriptures for today.

United Methodists accept God's call to BOTH Make Disciples AND Love our all our neighbors

John Wesley, again from his sermon on The Character of a Methodist writes that a Methodist,

does good unto all men (by which he meant all people); unto neighbours and strangers, friends and enemies. And that in every possible kind; not only to their bodies by feeding the hungry, cloathing the naked, visitting those that are sick or in prison; but much more does he labour to do good to their souls, as of the ability which God giveth: to awaken those that sleep in death; to bring those who are awakened to the atoning blood, that being justified by faith, they may have peace with God, and to provoke those who have peace with God, to abound more in love and in good works. And he is willing to spend and be spent herein, even to be offered up on the sacrifice and service of their faith, so they may all come unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

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